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ABSTRACT

Shared conventions of the modern radio industry should allow radio announcers and other producers of radio content to distinguish "good radio" from "bad radio." To help in making this distinction, a study delineated some of the basic conventions used in the production of radio content and analyzed the frequency of their appearance in a popular audio magazine targeted at contemporary disc jockeys. First, from the content of issues 1-100 of "Around the Dial" (ATD), an audio aircheck periodical published monthly since November, 1976, 452 representative segments were selected as a sampling frame; next, using a random selection procedure, 100 segments were drawn out for analysis. Analysis focused on three conventions: format type, frequency band, and class of service. Findings which showed that patterns of conventions may exemplify standards of "good radio" include (1) "good" music radio formats are likely to be some current derivative of Top-40 (e.g., Contemporary Hit Radio, Oldies); (2) although ATD presents an accurate ratio of AM to FM segments, the world of "good radio" presented by ATD is dominated by clear-channel AM stations in the United States; (3) the world of "good radio" exists in the top-ten Arbitron markets; (4) announcers who work on the air during the morning drive-time daypart apparently are "better" than those who work at other times of the day; and (5) there are more males than females in all dayparts. (Sixteen notes are attached.) (MS)

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The Contribution of *Around the Dial* to American Music Radio Announcing Culture

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Presented at the joint meeting of the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association, New Orleans, March 1988

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The Contribution of *Around the Dial* to American Music Radio Announcing Culture

The symbiotic relationship between popular culture and mass media is most durable.[1] Neither all popular culture is derived from mass mediated productions nor all media productions examples of popular culture. But the intimate collaboration between these two forces has been noted frequently.[2]

Radio has become one of the most enduring and pervasive forms of electronic mass media. There now are more than 10,000 radio stations in the United States, and the number is still growing.[3] Although radio audience estimates vary, the average person spends about equal amounts of time consuming both radio and television programming on a daily basis. Furthermore, 80 percent of the entire American population listens to radio at some point during each day. And some 12 million users of walk-along sets include radio as part of their daily routines.[4]

For the past 40 years, the "disc jockey" has been a staple of radio programming. The use of disc jockeys to create inexpensive local programming originated with independent stations during the heyday of network radio. As national network domination shifted from radio to television, almost all radio programming eventually relied on disc jockeys (also known as "hosts" or "personalities").

Today, the ubiquitous disc jockey generally serves a dual role as (1) radio technician or engineer and (2) on-air coordinator of music and news programming. The modern disc jockey works within considerable time and content constraints that are exacerbated by an increasingly fragmented and highly

competitive media marketplace. Successful disc jockeys must do more than just "run a tight board" and utter inane prattle. They must keep abreast of the conventions associated with the dynamic, modern radio industry.

Sanders' elaboration of a production of culture model suggests that constraints and pressures may be eased considerably during productive coordination "when actors--from original creators through consumers--share knowledge of and consistently utilize conventions" to form cultural products or to influence cultural production.[5] Becker observed that, among other uses, these shared conventions determine the ways in which the quality of a product is evaluated.[6] In the absence of some formal aesthetic standard, product and production conventions may be relied upon by producers to decide whether a given product is "good," "bad" or something in between.

Shared conventions, then, should allow radio announcers and other producers of radio content to distinguish "good radio" from "bad radio." In this paper we attempt to (1) delineate some of the basic conventions used in the production of radio content and (2) analyze the frequency of their appearance in a popular audio magazine targeted at contemporary disc jockeys.

The Conventions of Radio

As producers and purveyors of popular culture, radio programmers utilize a variety of industry conventions. An unfading radio convention is the musical format, or system for classifying recorded music for airing according to genre or popularity. A range of production conventions could be utilized to assess whether or not a particular format is being executed

properly, thereby resulting in judgements of "good" or "bad." And formats themselves may be compared with one another in an overall sense to determine if some formats are inherently better than others.

Likewise, announcing styles constitute a convention recognized by industry and consumers alike. Even in the absence of music, most casual listeners can determine on the basis of announcing style whether a station programs rock or classical music. Industry standards also can be used to determine whether a particular announcer is doing a "good" or "bad" job executing a particular format. As with formats generally, certain styles of announcing may reflect conventions of overall "good radio."

Other conventions illuminate what is or is not "good radio." For example, it is common for radio content to vary by daypart, or time of day. On many stations, morning announcers significantly depart from the rigid formats associated with other dayparts. For example, morning announcers typically talk more frequently and for longer periods of time than announcers who work at other times of the day. Morning announcers also may impart comparatively more useful information and humor. And there is a tendency for more voices to be heard during the morning than in other dayparts (e.g., the "morning team" concept).

Again, all morning announcers could be compared with respect to "good" or "bad" practitioners within that specific daypart. But in an overall sense, a comparison of all dayparts might lead one to conclude that morning announcers in general are comparatively better than, say, overnight announcers.

Frequency band is another convention that must be considered. Listeners associate current music programming with FM. News, talk, and nostalgic music programming (much of which was recorded in mono or in low-fidelity settings) are associated with AM. Almost any kind of music programming on AM or informational programming on FM might be considered by some to be "bad radio."

Finally, we must recognize that radio stations are far from being technically equal. Fifty-four AM stations in the United States operate with 50,000 watts at night and can be heard for as far as 800 miles. These stations have the greatest coverage of stations presently on the air. On the other hand, about 1,000 AM stations operate with 1,000 watts at night and can be heard only a few miles from their transmitters. And almost half of all AM stations operate during the daytime hours only, or with extremely low power at night.

Likewise, some FM stations operate with 100,000 watts and can be heard for about 100 miles. Other FM stations operate with 3,000 watts and can be heard for about 30 miles.

The varying potential impact of these stations is the price paid for dependable nationwide radio service. Although location is important (a low-power station in Chicago could have a much larger audience than a high-power station in Waterloo, Iowa), an industry convention is to look toward powerful stations for examples of good radio.

The Dissemination of Radio Conventions

These rule-of-thumb industry standards may be useful in distinguishing between "good" and "bad" radio. But how are they

communicated, and which ones are stressed?

These questions could be addressed by scholars who specialize in the study of media institutions and organizational communication. Since these are not our areas of expertise, we have chosen to examine an unusual media periodical targeted at radio announcers. This periodical can be described as a "talking magazine" that features "airchecks." Airchecks are quite literally "checks" of what has been on the "air." They typically are short audiotaped excerpts of on-air programming that feature prominent announcers or stations. Some announcers collect airchecks, particularly if the excerpts are significant in some historic or personal way.

Over the years, several people have launched audio aircheck periodicals. Although most disappeared after short periods of time, The Aircheck Factory has been operating for more than a decade. Publisher Tom Konard offers a monthly service in cassette format called *Around the Dial* (*ATD*). He recently published the 100th issue of *ATD*. Given the relatively short lives of similar services such as *Programmer's Digest* and *American Airchexx*, Konard's record of longevity is all the more impressive.[7]

In order to examine the role of shared conventions as barometers of "good radio," we examined the content of the *ATD* series in detail.

An Analysis of *ATD* Content

Our study focused on three conventions: (1) format type, (2) frequency band, and (3) class of service. The *ATD* series is limited to contemporary music formats. It features both AM and

FM stations. And it features varying classes of stations with concomitantly varying geographical coverage areas.[8]

Conventional industry wisdom holds that (1) stations programming contemporary popular music are more influential than stations programming country music, ethnic music, or "oldies"; (2) FM stations presently are more influential than AM stations; and (3) high-powered stations are more influential than less powerful stations.

Population

The *ATD* content we analyzed was limited to segments which identified stations by call letters and announcers by name. These segments were the units of analysis.

There typically were six or seven segments in each issue. We eliminated some of the material from the population because it was very different from the general fare. For example, *ATD* featured "nostalgia" segments from the 1950s and 1960s through issue 82 (July, 1983). After issue 82, Konard began offering this material as a separate service entitled *Yesterdial*. Since the nostalgia segments reflected historic rather than contemporary patterns of radio content, they were not analyzed.

We also eliminated airchecks of radio stations outside North America, such as segments featuring Australian or British stations or "pirate broadcasters" floating off the British coastline in international waters. Special segments consisting of material other than airchecks also were eliminated.

The reason we limited the scope of our analyses in this manner was the necessity of relying on some external anchor for comparison purposes. We chose the 1986 *Broadcasting Yearbook*,

supplemented with weekly issues of *Broadcasting* magazine for this purpose. The *Yearbook* provided archival information about stations in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, so we retained segments of Canadian and Mexican stations in the population. But since the *Yearbook* did not include Australian or European stations, we removed them from the population. We believe, however, that these exclusions are justified solely by the different nature of radio in Australia and Europe compared to radio in North America.

After elimination, 452 *ATD* segments remained in the sampling frame. These 452 segments date from The Aircheck Factory's inception in November, 1976 through January, 1985--issues one through 100.

Sample

Using a random selection procedure, we drew 100 segments for analysis. Our sample contained 16 Canadian segments and no Mexican segments. The remaining 84 segments were from the United States.

To provide some measure of the representativeness of the sample, the population was coded for (1) geographic location, (2) frequency band, and (3) network ownership status. Network owned-and-operated stations (O-and-O's) were among the most prominent stations in North America during the 10-year period we sampled. Chi-square analysis revealed a good fit of the sample to the population on geographic location, frequency band, and the proportion of O-and O's (all chi-square coefficients discussed in this paper are listed in Appendix 1). Based on these calculations, we concluded that our sample of *ATD* airchecks was

representative of the population of North American radio stations.

Coding

Several aspects of the sample content were recorded.[9] Afterward, the two coders recoded 10 segments for reliability assessment and reached identical results. Since both coders have virtually identical educational and professional backgrounds, attributes which led to a common frame of reference, such a high level of intercoder agreement was not unexpected.[10]

Results

Formats. The formats represented in the *ATD* segments differed significantly from the proportions of formats in the U.S. and Canada. This difference was accounted for by *ATD*'s overrepresentation of the Top-40 (CHR) and Oldies formats in 1977, 1981, and 1983.

Frequency band. The proportions of AM and FM stations featured in *ATD* did not differ from the proportion of AM and FM stations in the U.S. and Canada.

Class of station. The *ATD* sample also differed with respect to proportions of stations in various classes. This difference was found for AM and FM stations combined and for both AM and FM stations alone. We found far fewer daytime-only AM stations in the *ATD* sample (n=2) than expected, considering that almost 48 percent of U.S. AM stations are limited to daytime-only operation.[11]

Moreover, the *ATD* sample featured a disproportionate number of 50-thousand-watt, Class-I, clear-channel AM stations, which have by far the largest coverage areas of the U.S. stations.

Additional findings. We discovered several other differences between *ATD* content and archival data that illuminated the conventions of "good radio."

One finding of interest is the distribution of *ATD* segments by market rank. We coded the segments according to their 1985 Arbitron (a ratings firm) market ranks and collapsed them into six categories for analysis: markets 1-10, 11-25, 26-50, 51-100, 101-190, and 191-260.[12] Of the 39 segments featuring markets 1-10, the greatest number were of Los Angeles stations (n=12), followed by New York City and Chicago stations with eight segments each. Boston (n=5) and San Francisco (n=4) also were prominent. Dallas and Washington D.C. each were featured once. Beyond the top-ten markets, Phoenix (n=6) was the only market that was featured more than once. Our sample contained fewer segments in markets 11-25 (n=15), 26-50 (n=5), 51-100 (n=8), 101-190 (n=5), and the "condensed radio markets" from 191-260 (n=5).[13] There also were several segments from unranked small markets (n=7). Chi-square analysis revealed a highly disproportionate distribution of segments based on market size. *ATD* segments featuring the top-ten markets were vastly overrepresented.

Another finding of interest was the distribution of segments by daypart. Although stations differ with regard to what hours constitute a daypart, several time periods are widely agreed upon as typical. Table 1 shows these dayparts and their respective *ATD* segment frequencies.

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insert Table 1 about here

Again, chi-square analysis revealed that the *ATD* sample disproportionately represented some dayparts. Segments featuring morning announcers clearly were dominant while segments featuring midday announcers were underrepresented.

Discussion

By their very nature, content studies reflect patterns that become dated very quickly. This certainly is true in the present study given the dynamics of the North American radio industry. But we believe certain patterns of convention clearly are evident in these data. These conventions may exemplify standards of "good radio."

First, "good" music radio formats are likely to be some current derivative of Top-40 (e.g., Contemporary Hit Radio, Oldies). Although a considerable number of country music stations flourished in North America during the 10-year period we studied, they seldom were featured on *ATD*.[14] In other words, country music formats do not seem to constitute "good radio."

Second, although *ATD* presents an accurate ratio of AM to FM segments, the world of "good radio" presented by *ATD* is dominated by clear-channel AM stations in the U.S. In other words, announcers working for stations with the widest signals are more likely to be considered "good radio" practitioners than their counterparts on FM or low-powered AM stations. This is a curious finding, since pre[illegible]ly about 70 percent of the radio audience listens to the FM band. Moreover, many clear-channel stations

devote significant parts of their schedules to paid religious broadcasts and per-inquiry advertising. Is this "good radio"?

Third, the world of "good radio" exists in the top-ten Arbitron markets. It is especially likely to be found in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago.

Fourth, announcers who work on the air during the morning drive-time daypart apparently are "better" than those who work at other times of the day.

Finally, the world of "good radio" points to another convention of long-standing in the radio industry. In our *ATD* sample, there were more males (n=93) than females (n=7) in all dayparts. A few of these males (n=3) were doing "two-men" morning shows, but there were no "two-women" shows. This appears to be an accurate portrayal of a male-dominated occupation, although the possibility of an idiosyncratic *ATD* emphasis could not be assessed with these data.[15]

We realize that we have discussed these conventions as if they existed independently when if fact some of them do not. For example, many of the top-ten markets are home to several clear-channel AM stations. But they are home to several daytimers too.

And though radio's portability, particularly in automobiles, might explain some of *ATD*'s emphasis on the morning drive daypart (when most radio listening occurs), portability fails to account for the greater number of evening segments featured in *ATD* compared to afternoon drive-time segments. Overall radio listening is known to fall off sharply after six p.m.[16]

Explaining the preponderance of Top-40 or CHR-oriented segments also is difficult, since this format has been showing

overall signs of fragmentation and decline despite a recent upsurge in popularity.

What purpose, then, is served through the perpetuation of these shared conventions or standards of "good radio"? Perhaps to some degree they serve the functional purpose of lending stability and cohesion to an occupational group that would otherwise lack not only unity but also career path reference points. Conventional standards of "good radio" may help music radio announcers keep themselves abreast of the activities of their peers by serving as reference points for their own career development and goals for where they "ought to go next."

Additionally, conventions also may prove to be important factors in the socialization of aspiring announcers. The remarkable tendency announcers display toward homogeneous self-replication ultimately may prove to be related more to a preoccupation with doing "good radio" than concern for audience and community service. Whatever standards of "good radio" are reinforced by services such as *ATD,* it is important to realize that these standards do not exist independently of the corporate culture most announcers and programmers inhabit or the wider society where audiences reside.

It is also important to remember that *ATD* is a subscriber-based periodical. The subscribers probably provide the producer with at least some feedback. It would be unfair and incorrect to accuse Konard of imposing an arbitrary set of "good radio" standards on his subscribers in any conspiratorial way. In the case of *ATD,* any conspiracy would be one of extreme conservatism or reinforcement of the status quo. What probably occurs is

interaction between the producer, whose tastes for this content may be idiosyncratic, and his subscribers' expectations.

Conclusion

We have examined the prevalence of several radio industry conventions in an unusual medium, an audiotaped magazine with a small subscription base targeted at radio announcers. The analysis has been exploratory and our findings have been modest.

But we are sure of one thing: The radio industry continues to change. Satellite networks capable of delivering high-fidelity programming and other developments brought about by sophisticated technology are wearing away at the need for local radio talent. The conventions that emerge from our analysis of *ATD* content, however, do little to reflect this change. By emphasizing clear-channel AM stations and male announcers, *ATD* emerges as functionally conservative if not a step behind the times.

We suspect that our data imply more than we have discussed. Perhaps our colleagues who are trained in criticism, institutional process analysis, organizational communication, and media ethics will see possibilities for further research aimed at assessing whether conventional standards of "good radio" inhibit or encourage the socially responsible use of the radio medium.

NOTES

[1]Kathleen J. Turner, *Mass Media and Popular Culture* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1984), pp. 2-3.

[2]For example, see Marshall Fishwick, *Parameters of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974), pp. 1-7.

[3]National Association of Broadcasters, "Media Watch," *Broadcast Marketing and Technology News* (October, 1987): p. 1. Some 10,144 radio stations were on the air as of August 31, 1987. Of this total, 4,893 were commercial AM stations; 3,975 were commercial FM stations; and the remaining 1,276 were noncommercial FM stations. These figures did not include construction permits for new facilities. The total is expected to rise due to the recent FCC decision to license more than 600 new FM stations under Docket 80-90. The FCC also is considering the feasibility of (1) adding a second band of FM frequencies, resulting in FM1 and FM2 bands; and (2) extending the AM band from its present upper limit of 1600 KiloHertz to 1700 kHz.

[4]William E. McCavitt and Peter K. Pringle, *Electronic Media Management* (Boston: Focal Press, 1986), p. 91.

[5]Clinton R. Sanders, "Structural and Interactional Features of Popular Culture Production: An Introduction to the Production of Culture Perspective," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 16 (1982), p. 67.

[6]H. Becker, "Art as Collective Action," *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974), pp. 767-776.

[7]*Programmer's Digest* (*PD*) was published on disc rather than cassette from 1972 to 1975. Its originator, Buddy Blake,

produced 40 issues before its demise. Coincidentally, Konard produced several segments on pirate radio in Europe for *PD*. Another service, *American Airchexx*, lasted only 12 issues in cassette format during the mid 1970s.

Other aircheck services appeal to more limited interests. *Major Market Airchecks* concentrates on top-25 market announcers and stations. *California Airchecks* is limited to announcers and stations in the southern California area.

Although these services are interesting in their own right, they are not as broad-based or representative of the radio industry as *ATD*.

[8]There are four classes of AM stations (I-IV). Class I and Class II stations operate with relatively high power and cover large service areas. Class III and Class IV stations operate with less power and cover regional or local service areas. Because AM propagation changes significantly at night, most AM stations reduce power or use directional antennas after local sunset (many do both).

FM stations fall into essentially three classes. Class C stations cover about 100 miles. Class B stations cover about 50 miles. And Class A stations cover about 30 miles. FM propagation does not change appreciably from day to night, so FM stations operate with the same power and antenna configurations at all times.

[9]These included call letters, market rank, frequency band, dial position within frequency bands, class, day and night power, antenna pattern type, hours of operation, format, announcer characteristics, and length of segment.

[10]Guido H. Stempel and Bruce H. Westley, *Research Methods in Mass Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981), pp. 128-129.

[11]Recent treaty negotiations with Canada and Mexico have allowed many daytime-only AM stations to remain on the air after sunset with nominal power (sometimes as low as 10 watts).

[12]We grouped market ranks in this manner on the basis of a map provided by Arbitron depicting its 1985 radio markets. An Arbitron representative in New York explained that the divisions on the map reflect distinctions frequently made by clients. The representative also explained that these divisions do not represent any official Arbitron distinction regarding which markets belong in market categories such as "major," "large," "medium," or "small." Since we were unable to find any other industry standard reflecting market categories, we used the market divisions on the Arbitron map and avoided labels such as "major market" since no source (including Arbitron, apparently) seems to agree on which markets belong in specific categories.

[13]According to the Arbitron representative, "condensed radio markets" are surveyed on the basis of the number of counties in their metropolitan areas, rather than metropolitan area population figures. There are 70 "condensed" markets in addition to the 190 "standard" markets.

[14]*ATD* is geared to subscribers, so representativeness is not necessarily a production consideration.

[15]There appear to be no estimates of the number of radio announcers in general, much less on the basis of gender. Our efforts to find this information included telephone calls to the

National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the Federal Communications Commission, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to a NAB librarian, no one is gathering this information because there has been no need for it. How government enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity standards in the radio industry has proceeded is much less understandable to us in light of this inquiry.

[16]Herbert H. Howard and Michael S. Kievman, *Radio and TV Programming* (Columbus, OH: Grid, 1983), p. 147.

Appendix 1

Chi-Square Coefficients

Proportion	X^2
Sample Representativeness (Goodness of Fit)	
Geographic location	(2, N=100) = 4.92, n.s.
Frequency band	(2, N=100) = 0.25, n.s.
Network O-and-O's	(1, N=100) = 1.60, n.s.
Content-Analytic Results	
Formats	(5, N=100) = 50.22, $p < .001$
Frequency band	(2, N=100) = 0.02, n.s.
Class of station	(5, N=100) = 104.58, $p < .001$
Market size	(5, N=100) = 499.47, $p < .001$
Dayparts	(5, N=100) = 42.07, $p < .001$

Table 1

Frequency of Dayparts in ATD *Sample*

Daypart	Hours	Frequency (Percentage)
Mornings	6:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	37
Middays	10:00 a.m.- 3:00 p.m.	9
Afternoons	3:00 p.m.- 7:00 p.m.	15
Evenings	7:00 p.m.-12 Midnight	24
Overnights	12 Midnight - 6:00 a.m.	6
Weekends	various*	9
	Total *N* (%) =	100

*These segments featured part-time announcers who typically hosted some type of speciality program--in most cases, a Saturday evening "oldies show."